

VZCZCXRO2169
RR RUEHCD RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHSR
DE RUEHKB #0196 0410411
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 100411Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9570
INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE

UNCLAS BAKU 000196

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SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958:N/A

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT FIRES ONE MORE MINISTER, APPOINTS TWO
MORE

REF: A) BAKU 154; B) BAKU 1593; C) BAKU 184

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11. (U) On February 7 President Ilham Aliyev dismissed Minister of Labor and Social Protection Ali Naghiyev and replaced him with Fizuli Alakbarov, former head of Improtex travel agency. Additionally, the President assigned Azad Rahimov, former head of a furniture import firm, as the new Minister of Youth and Sports following the transfer of the former Minister to the new Ministry of Culture and Tourism (ref a).

CHANGE OF MINISTERS CHANGES BALANCE OF POWER

12. (SBU) The dismissal of Naghiyev came as no surprise. He has been a candidate for removal since the day the former Minister of Health Ali Insanov was dismissed and detained for allegedly plotting a coup (ref b). Both Naghiyev and Insanov were the most influential representatives of Western Azerbaijanis or "YerAz's" and also members of the "91 group," the group that orchestrated the return of the late President Heydar Aliyev. Naghiyev is also widely believed to have overseen massive corruption in his ministry. In contrast, the new Minister of Labor is close to the recently assigned Minister of Culture and Tourism Abulfaz Garayev, formerly Minister of Youth, Sport, and Tourism. Garayev is known to have close personal relations with the First Family. Minister Alakbarov does not have prior government experience.

13. (SBU) New Minister of Youth and Sport Rahimov also is a businessman and political newcomer. He is co-owner of "ItalDesign" company, an importer of expensive furniture and home appliances from Europe. He also is a close contact of the President and his wife and it is rumored that he and the first lady studied together at secondary school.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: This change of leadership further reduces the influence of the YerAz clan and increases the number of political elite with personal ties to the President or his trusted allies. As stated ref c, the President's latest moves further demonstrate that he is quietly but steadily remaking the Cabinet in his own image.

HARNISH